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## AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE, PROPHETIC NARRATION, AND TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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**H**UMAN BEINGS TELL STORIES; we may call them “narratives.” They are crucial to human life and fruitful to study because they mediate past and present, social condition and interior experience, inherited circumstance and agency, and collective and personal identity. As collective artifacts internalized as part of identity, stories also foster the reflection that infuses them with new meanings. For a political theorist, then, narratives make visible the cultural dimensions in politics.

In American political culture, the prophetic story of captivity, deliverance, and founding legacy, thus of decline from origins and redemption, has been especially important. In this essay, I investigate how differently situated Americans have retold this story to authorize claims about rights, inequality, membership, history, and their meaning. I trace this narrative first in Anglo-American men defending liberal nationalism; next, in the oppositional political of those they have excluded; then in current culture; and last, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Focusing on the resources, limits, and dangers of the prophetic narrative clarifies two issues. One is hegemony. How are we to assess the power of governing narratives in political life and the limits and possibilities in retelling them? The other is redemption, an idea at the core of the prophetic story and American political culture. How are we to assess the dream of fixing the crimes and suffering that flaw our nation and past to “make good” an original but unfulfilled promise of freedom?

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My retellings analyze hegemony first in terms of an Americanized Marx: I use Sacvan Bercovitch in particular to explore the role of prophetic narration in efforts to sustain, or challenge, liberalism. But then—as if using a democratized Nietzsche—I explore the hegemony not of liberalism but of redemptive rhetorics in elite and oppositional politics and in current political culture. By relating past and present versions of prophetic narration, I create a context for reading *Beloved* as a literary work of political thought; by narrating as tragedy the quest for deliverance, it retells a compulsively repeated story to confront the redemptive dream at its core.

### THE NARRATIVE OF THE GOOD SON

Claims about liberal hegemony, master narratives, or national identity are risky. They can efface the agency and flatten the contest they profess to value. But such claims are needed to understand domination, the meaning of lived experience, and the fashioning of agency. My scaffolding for *Beloved*, then, begins with Sacvan Bercovitch's *American Jeremiad* because it links liberalism, prophetic narration, and ideals of nationhood to theorize hegemony in American politics.<sup>1</sup>

For Bercovitch, conflict and aspiration have been governed by a liberalism sustained, contra Louis Hartz, by the hegemony of a prophetic and Puritan narrative form, and thus by a particular idea of nationhood. In the story he tells, Anglo-American propertied men formed a liberal and national identity by differentiation from Old World despotism, but also from native peoples, slaves, women, and propertyless men. Believing that a Puritan and constitutional legacy yielded personal and political self-government, partly by such exclusions, self-declared heirs claimed to form a special nation, called by God to free humanity, but therefore vulnerable to decline and corruption.<sup>2</sup>

Through a prophetic view of deliverance in history, they sacralized origins, wedding liberal principles to national identity and endowing both with redemptive significance in a providentially authored history. But liberal hegemony has been sustained, Bercovitch argues, because differently situated groups continued to argue about inequality, identity, and difficulty through the genre of the jeremiad, a "prescribed ritual form" that elicits and yet "contains" self-reflection and dissent (p. 79).

In its biblical form, the jeremiad roots both freedom and nationhood in origins by positing a legacy that delivered founders from captivity. Prophets narrated nationhood in a way that linked identity to original commitments, their betrayal to enslavement, and their pious recovery to renewed freedom.

Performatively, by blaming captivity, conflict, and suffering on deviation from founding norms, a jeremiad secures their authority. It elicits guilt about their betrayal, hence gives meaning to suffering, and thereby solicits recommitment.

As redemption means both deliverance and repossession, so a jeremiad recovers the commitments that deliver a chosen people from the impulses, activities, and groups deemed to cause captivity. As redemption also means making good what is flawed, so this story redeems both a nation flawed by crime and suffering and also the very legacy it posits as a saving authority, neither admirable but irretrievable, nor extant but problematic.

By a "traditional" jeremiad, then, elites recurrently use present problems to bind unequal Americans to a narrowly defined Puritan and liberal legacy, whose violation is construed to cause their difficulties. But, Bercovitch shows, legacy also includes a "revolutionary mythos" of a people hostile to tradition, capable of the unprecedented. Thus elites and those they dominate have used jeremiads to abstract from "actual" origins a promise whose realization justifies *change*, framed in progressive but still redemptive terms. What are the insights, and then the problems, in this view of jeremiads as a ritual of criticism?<sup>3</sup>

Most simply, Bercovitch shows the communitarian face of liberal politics. Anglo-Americans have authorized rights and formed nationhood by narrating a project of personally enacting and collectively fulfilling a redemptive purpose. Self and nation are profoundly joined because the sacred meaning of "America" authorizes the rights of self-making men who bear and signal the fate of a national project. A class ideal has been interiorized and generalized, and "Americans" made, as people enter and use a narrative that elicits anxious effort to redeem their promise.<sup>4</sup>

Second, he shows how jeremiads mediated the inclusionary promise of this ideal community and the exclusion of nonliberal otherness it requires: Jeremiads define membership by distinguishing the true heirs who honor an emancipatory legacy and those who threaten it, and thus can justify racial violence, imperial expansion, or assimilation supervised by good sons.

Third, Bercovitch shows how such jeremiads have been cast as false prophecy by major movements of opposition, which have argued about modernization and inequality by revising a story of redemptive purpose and betrayal. In speaking of literary artists, he also depicts most American reformers: "The dream that inspired them to defy the false Americanism of their time compelled them to speak their defiance as keepers of the dream" (p. 180).

Fourth, he shows how jeremiads displace politics by culture: grievances are voiced not in strongly contrasted "moral and social" alternatives to a

dominant order, but in competing calls for "cultural revitalization" of its authentic but jeopardized values (p. 179). Confirming the religiosity of a special nationhood and moralizing conflicts that signify the fate of a more perfect union, critics occlude the political sense that any community is divided by conflicts of identity and interest.

These insights about "American" civic identity frame his notorious claim that jeremiadic criticism *necessarily* "contains" dissent. His goal is to identify not the range of dissent, but its legitimating center of gravity: to be legitimate, critics "must" invoke liberal rights or capitalist norms; racial or patriarchal ideology can be rejected, but "must" be deemed a *violation* of core values like self-determination and voluntarist community, which "must" appear both native and unproblematic. The "must" is contingent yet intractable. It signals a cultural hegemony rooted in social power and narrative form; it marks the internal and strategic pressures driving critics to redeem the society they condemn by naming their ideals "truly American."<sup>5</sup>

Still there are profound problems. Simply put, Bercovitch renders American culture too monolithic. But rather than recover the complexity within the liberal tradition he flattens, or voice the other narratives that make its hegemony more contested than he allows, I pursue three problems within his story of jeremiadic form and liberal hegemony. First is motivation. Why do succeeding generations find a jeremiadic story meaningful and empowering? Second is variation. Does it "work" to secure liberal hegemony, despite the differing social positions and intentions that shape oppositional efforts to use it? Third is redemptive American rhetorics. Do they in fact exceed liberal limits, but impose other ones? Through these questions I will explain the power and also reconceive the foreclosure that Bercovitch attributes to prophetic narration.

### MOTIVATION: THE ANXIETY OF THE ISAACS

Why and how do declining classes and groups of "new men" repeatedly infuse tropes of decline and deliverance with specific meanings? Why do their narrations mobilize White men (and women) across class lines? Such queries expose the missing motivational core in Bercovitch's story, but have been addressed by scholars inspired by American literature. They depict an America founded not only on contract and rights in markets and legislatures but also on Native American graves, slave labor, rape, and incest.<sup>6</sup>

In these readings, Anglo-Americans formulate liberal rights, manly independence, and chosen nationhood by marking racial and gendered difference;

in turn, the excluded enter and haunt the imagination of the enfranchised, who name difficulty and depict corruption in racial and gendered terms. A "rebirth of freedom" thus depends on overcoming the threats to personal autonomy and national unity that elite jeremiads lodge in the self and in racial others and women, the city, and the state.

On one hand, a liberal culture intensifies male anxiety about dependence because it celebrates the idealized independence Lawrence called "masterlessness" and because the market "makes men the playthings of alien powers," as Marx put it. In tropes of corruption as decline, propertied men recurrently voice an anxiety they blame not on their ideal—nor on familial and market practices deemed to secure it—but on impulses, groups, and activities that subvert both. Casting themselves as good sons rescuing a paternal legacy from corruption and other sons from dependence, self-declared Isaacs direct resentment of powerlessness in a way that empowers them as fathers while binding widespread aspirations for autonomy to a liberal order.

On the other hand, their jeremiadic stories regenerate the sovereignty of self in a way that voices the dream of belonging that is internal to liberalism. Liberal society generates communal aspirations that elite jeremiads lodge in the nation; as a "union" of rights-bearing individuals, the nation is what Marx called an "allegorical community," created by abstracting from the group power and conflict that represent earthly taint. However, this abstraction is enormously powerful because it represents the gendered division between the "home" and the corrupt world. Adapting biblical jeremiads, which make the paternal household a metaphor for nationhood, elites recurrently depict antifamilial subversion of what otherwise would be a harmonious home to justify the purification that restores it.<sup>7</sup>

Elite jeremiads, as in Reagan-era discourse, continue to be rhetorically powerful and thus instrumentally effective because they voice alienation and loss of purpose while promising to recover a shared identity of self-determination. As a political theory, however, this poetry of rebirth is self-defeating for those it mobilizes. It enables them to lament acquisitive life but demonizes alternatives; enables criticism of servitude, but premises freedom for some on subjugation of others; celebrates democracy, but also the industrializing capitalism that entombs it; voices longing for community, but empowers the state.

Such arguments have been articulated by an oppositional tradition that distinguishes true and false prophecy. Those cast as Sarahs, Hagars, and Ishmaels have reconceived autonomy and community by retelling a story of legacy and decline. Can oppositional use of a jeremiad contest the liberal hegemony Bercovitch attributes to its "form?"

### VARIATION AND USE: OPPOSITIONAL RETELLINGS

Bercovitch rightly emphasizes the extent to which groups cast outside a middle-class fold have retold jeremiadic stories. Yet liberal hegemony has been more contingent and contested than he allows because jeremiadic form does not in itself foreclose criticism of liberal origins and norms. However, briefly showing this shifts attention to the redemptive rhetorics shared by contrasting jeremiads.

Middle-class female reformers, labor Republicans, abolitionists, agrarian populists, Debsian workers, progressive reformers, and civil rights activists often used jeremiadic narration to diagnose their captivity and redeem the nation from the sins that caused it. In each case, critics and actors became true heirs of the American promise, even as they redefined the meaning of rights and redemptive community. They reenacted the emancipatory promise of liberalism by invoking individual rights against antiliberal despotism, but also claimed their community embodied a special virtue because of its location, suffering, and capacity for service and sacrifice. In the idioms of sisterhood, cooperative commonwealth, moral household, or beloved community, excluded and aggrieved groups have been reborn as protagonists in stories of redeeming the promise of a corrupted America.<sup>8</sup>

Their jeremiadic stories of corruption and rebirth linked rights and the ethos of care that liberalism assigned to the home, to expose subjugation in a liberal legacy and foster more inclusive and substantive conceptions of equality and freedom. Out-groups thereby display the legitimacy and empowerment derived from redemptive rhetoric; by invoking but revising widely shared ideals, critics revise familial, racial, and market practices to fix what went wrong in the past and make good the "American" promise of delivering (all) people from captivity.<sup>9</sup>

Hence jeremiads need not "contain" dissent in narrowly liberal terms. By folding conflict into narratives that redeem America's promise, though, out-groups mirrored elites. Claiming innocent virtue, antagonists piously invoke a legacy others betray; by redemptive service each would actualize the dream of a nation both free and harmonious. In turn, contrasts of Eugene Debs and Emma Goldman, Jane Addams and Randolph Bourne, or Martin Luther King and Malcolm X suggest the pressures that rhetorics of American redemption impose on historically excluded groups.

First, when legitimacy depends on defending a founding legacy against corruption, outcasts are pressed to redeem rather than question the very ideas and traditions that have required or sanctioned their exclusion. Second, when legitimacy requires speaking to and for *everyone* in a community, critics are pressed to deny rather than voice the depth of conflicting interests. Third,

when legitimacy derives from the moral authority of a redemptive role, protagonists are pressed to disown in themselves the carnality, interestedness, and power that signify corruption in the social body they would purify.

### REDEMPTIVE RHETORICS AND IDENTITY POLITICS

The marginality of certain critical voices suggests that jeremiadic criticism formed a gravitational field in which no legitimate discourse questioned whether crimes and suffering *can* be redeemed, let alone at what cost. But are group identities, arguments, and conflict still governed by this field? To engage this question, or identify politics in political culture now, I use claims about guilt and innocence to relate recent uses of nationalist jeremiads and recent captivity stories that reject American origins.

Historically, our political rhetoric has echoed the two ways that biblical prophets explained but also *used* suffering. In one, worldly difficulty signals the guilt of those who must will their suffering as penance to become worthy of pardon and redemption. Thus did Lincoln insist on the guilt of his chosen people, atoned by willing the suffering of war, itself redeemed as "we the living" consecrate the dead by bearing their purpose. Thus did social movements name national failure to elicit the guilt and justify the conflict that would redeem America's promise. So too, many Americans internalize social position as a guilt they must redeem through sacrifice.

Yet American jeremiads emphasized more a second approach: worldly difficulty signals the innocence of those who will use suffering to achieve *vindication* as redeemers of a guilty world. Thus do elite jeremiads lodge guilt in alien powers that hold innocent men captive; out-groups have disowned the (always reluctant) vengeance elites endorse, but wounded innocence appears in stories of captivity to the power of guilty others, or of a posterity that betrays the sacrifices of forebears.<sup>10</sup>

In turn, political argument since Nixon has refigured guilt and innocence by revising captivity narratives. A working class undergoing economic decline and cultural change has responded to nationalist jeremiads depicting innocent White victims of a demonic love triangle, an invasive state serving only Blacks and middle-class women. Meanwhile, politicized women and minorities have come to narrate not jeremiads redeeming American origins, but captivity stories that posit other origins to relocate belonging in the sub- or supranational identities of innocently suffering and thus redemptive protagonists. Stories of countercommunity, however, echo jeremiadic rhetoric of pure origins, guilty deviation, and purifying renewal.<sup>11</sup>



Therefore, despite differences about authoritative origins, groups form and fight by drawing legitimacy from a narrative of innocent captivity. As a result, they "must" compete for and wed themselves to the status of oppressed victim, hence an innocent, virtuous, and redemptive protagonist. In these terms, good sons "save America" through nationalist jeremiads regulating literal and discursive access to a paternal estate endangered by guilty others, while those cast out are policed by appeals to authentic belonging in counterredemptive communities. In turn, critics have fashioned left-Puritan jeremiads in which consumer culture, narcissism, and victim politics subvert the producer ethos, civic culture, and self-restraint that secure democratic politics.<sup>12</sup>

At issue, however, is not the extent of conflict in a culture of complaint, for democratic politics should involve contrasting efforts to link private grievances and public causes. At issue, rather, is the form given to resentment and grievance. That form does not reflect the decline of a guilt culture, for its moral categories still produce legitimacy, or "fragmentation" of national culture, by whose governing terms identity still is articulated. Political culture thus displays not incredulity toward a master narrative of captivity and redemption, but its continuing role in shaping resentment, legitimacy, and identity.

The contradictions in the Clinton administration and the recent Republican "contract" demonstrate Bercovitch's point, for many Americans still live within a closed circle of compulsive repetition. They speak within a discursive horizon of corruption and renewal to the degree they orient action and legitimacy only by a story of innocent American origins. They reiterate a moral logic of blame and vindication to the degree they use guilt and innocence to mark power and legitimacy. And they sustain a rhetoric of betrayal and purification to the degree their suffering binds them to stories of redeeming it. But such symmetries appear in narrations that oppose the symbolism of "America" by redeeming the innocent otherness of a community suffering captivity within it. It is no accident, then, that Morrison retells a captivity story to diagnose the origins and history, the suffering and moralizing logic, that bind masters and ex-slaves to repetition.

### BELOVED: REDEMPTION AS A PROBLEM

*Beloved* appeared more than one hundred years after the last slave narratives, in the fading shadow of both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, during another "post" reconstruction resurgence of White ra-

cism, and amid Afrocentric revivalism. In it, Morrison rethinks all the inherited stories of servitude and emancipation, the moral categories they entail, and the idea of redemption at their core. In my reading, *Beloved* retells a captivity narrative to theorize about servitude and freedom specifically by linking various kinds of imprisonment to the pursuit of redemption. In it, the deliverance sought by men and Whites has enslaved others, but ex-slaves also risk imprisonment in the effort to redeem their past and themselves.

I focus on the meaning of the plot centered around Sethe, a woman who escapes from the plantation "Sweet Home," the White father's household, and settles in a community of escaped Blacks in the North. In this new community without Whites, she sets up for herself and her children a home without husbands and fathers. Yet the past and the White world invade it when her former owner appears. In what she considers a supreme act of love, she tries to kill her four children, but can send only one "through the veil . . . where she will be safe." That child is named "Beloved" at burial because Sethe cannot afford a full gravestone inscription. This is a flashback nineteen years later, as Sethe is isolated from the community and haunted by a "spiteful" ghost who becomes flesh.

In Sethe's guilty effort to redeem her deed by sacrificing herself to gain the ghost's forgiveness, and in Beloved's effort to both punish Sethe and guarantee her love, we see the haunting legacy of a formally emancipated ex-slave and an understandable but destructive symbiosis between mother and child. Sethe's neighbors, guilty because their envious ill will against her was fulfilled nineteen years before, resolve that the ghost and past should not possess her or the present. As they face her house to exorcise the ghost, a White man appears and a hallucinatory Sethe relives the terror that once led to murder. But she directs her rage at the man rather than destroys what she loves. As Sethe tries (but fails) to strike him, Beloved disappears.

Feeling loss and lost, Sethe laments, "She was my best thing," but only now can she begin to learn, as her lover Paul D. insists, "you your best thing, Sethe, you are." The narrator, having retold a devastating captivity narrative and resurrected its ghosts, does not tell us Sethe's future, but appears to call for an end to the compulsive repeating of the past:

It was not a story to pass on. . . . They forget her like a bad dream . . . quickly and deliberately. . . . Remembering seemed unwise. . . . It was not a story to pass on. . . . So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. . . . This is not a story to pass on. . . . By and by all trace is gone. . . . The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss.

"Pass on" means transmit but also to "pass on that," as in let it go by: the story is not to be passed by, and yet not to be repeated as such; it must be confronted but not repeated in the way it is retold. As if confirming this core ambiguity, these passages are followed by the novel's last word, "Beloved."

The novel's protagonists are almost all African American men and women. The story obviously concerns the horrors and anonymous dead of the middle passage, the experience of slavery, and their legacy. Represented primarily in and by a mother/daughter bond, this legacy also suggests how motherhood under patriarchy has been enslaving. By depicting how the power of Blacks and women to name, (re)produce, and nurture has been appropriated, *Beloved* shows the legacy ex-slaves take inside and emplots how a struggle to become free is shaped by its haunting power. The novel thereby renders the ambiguity of memory, for remembering slavery and the dis(re)membered seems essential yet imprisoning; and narration, necessary to selfhood and to community, yet dangerous in its promise of closure.<sup>13</sup>

In turn, commentary focuses on race and gender, familial dynamics and psychology, and memory and narrative, but severed from American political culture. Yet Morrison's protagonists do not exemplify difference alone, voicing only what Anglo-American culture silences. Their haunting past, continuing servitude, and quest for personal rebirth and community also participate in and reveal core dreams of the culture they stand within and against. Her retelling of a captivity narrative, if situated in a dual context of difference and commonality, of entwined "nations," appears as a profound meditation on freedom and redemption and thus as a transfiguring exercise in political education.

To contextualize the novel in this way, begin with the deed that Morrison says inspired it: Margaret Garner, who killed her infant to prevent its return to slavery, became a key symbol for slavery apologists, Frederick Douglass, and White abolitionists. Douglass used Garner to symbolize the horror of slavery, arguing that "every mother who . . . plunges a knife into the bosom of her infant to save it from the hell of our Christian slavery should be . . . honored as a benefactress." By narration, the deed is given a meaning both particular and general; at issue is how a story makes visible the ambiguities in constituency and condition, experience and responsibility, carried by the word "our."<sup>14</sup>

Following Douglass in part, the novel reiterates the slave narrative that inverts Anglo-American versions of jeremiadic prophecy: New World and Christian origins do not deliver from despotism, but impose hell on earth, an Egyptian servitude. By narrating the meaning of legacy and freedom from the position not of fathers and sons but of slaves as mothers and daughters, *Beloved* thus inverts the origins of culture and history, shifting from White

to Black and paternity to maternity. But Morrison does not counter only the masters' discourses: slave narratives, she says, "drop a veil" over "proceedings too terrible to relate," as if survival required forgetting. But "the struggle to forget which was important to survive was fruitless, and I wanted to make it fruitless." She would "rip that veil and expose a truth about the interior life of a people who didn't write it."<sup>15</sup>

By a veil, slave narratives sever physical and formal emancipation from the psychic and cultural legacy of servitude. Since that veil sunders the internal and external and thus the past and present, Morrison tells a ghost story for the reasons that Melville or Poe, she has argued, used the genre of romance to show the return of what is repressed in liberal narratives of self-making and political emancipation. "We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can . . . start over. . . . The culture doesn't encourage . . . coming to terms with the truth" about the past, which is made "absent or romanticized." Thus she rips a veil that has joined Whites and Blacks, whose emancipatory stories entail what she calls a "national amnesia" about a past and "interior life" that "no one wants to remember."<sup>16</sup>

This jeremiadic denunciation of forgetting frames her novel, but as it goes behind the veil, memory also appears as a problem because the past is uprooting, slavery, and death. The novel recovers not a betrayed legacy of freedom, but a history that connects slavery and modernity, terror and rationalized labor, and racial domination and liberal democracy. "Americans," for different reasons, "veil" a past that has divided but also shaped and entwined them. Its haunting power, in turn, appears as the uncanny, the repressed returning within a family, in Anglo- and African American discourse a key trope for community, for depicting the vicissitudes of history and interior, and thus for making a parable about politics.

Since for Morrison "modern life begins with slavery," those vicissitudes are particular to Sethe and slavery, yet prefigure what she calls a "modern" effort to forge self, freedom, and meaning from a crucible of uprooting, violence, and suffering. Since Sethe struggles to justify a suffering that arises partly from her own bloody choices, and since *Beloved* represents the claims and voraciousness of a wounding past, the story confronts in its particulars an interracial problematic binding suffering, moral justification, and redemption to freedom.<sup>17</sup>

That redemption is central to Morrison's concerns appears most obviously in the problem of naming, crucial to and in the novel. Sethe evokes Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, whose name means "anointed by God." In turn, Paul, a name associated with rebirth, is given to every male slave at Sweet Home by their deluded "liberal" owner, Garner. And Paul had rewritten

Hosea's words, the book's epigraph: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved."

Here is announced the promise of redemption and who is to be redeemed. Many readers of the novel thus contrast "Old Testament" law (of Whites and fathers) and a "New Testament" promise of redemption, borne by those seeking deliverance. As Mae Henderson argues, Morrison "enacts . . . an opposition between Law and Spirit, redeeming her characters from the curse of the law as figured in the masters' discourse." Sethe "achieves redemption" through the "creation of a cohesive psychoanalytic and historical narrative" that links healing to beloved community. She is "delivered" from the cursed law and "made whole" through a story that "makes good" her suffering by endowing it with a special (redemptive) power.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, in my reading, *Beloved* makes the epigraph's promise less secure and more troubling. It undercuts Christianized dichotomies to question the bond tying suffering to redemption. An effort to become free must begin with servitude as a legacy and depends on confronting the dream of making good what went wrong in the past, which binds us to it. Against Bercovitch, though, Morrison subverts a compulsively repeated story of captivity and redemption by retelling it as tragedy.

Showing how this story has divided and yet entwined masters and ex-slaves, *Beloved* depicts its costs, explains its powerful appeal, elicits possibilities it forecloses, and thus reconceives its promise of freedom. By this repetition with a difference, a past not dead or even past is no longer denied, but neither is it redeemed; finally given its due, it can be put to some kind of rest. This "working through" is achieved through three moments central to Sethe's story—Southern slavery, Northern haunting, and *Beloved*'s disappearance.

The story originates in the plantation "Sweet Home" that White men created in pursuit of freedom through the right to own property and the idea of limited government. This first moment, which conditions all that follows, depicts the emancipatory masterlessness mythically and politically sought by those Anglo-American men D.H. Lawrence calls escaped slaves; fleeing mother and despotism, they define freedom as the absence of dependence. Their freedom thus requires servitude, for if dependence is slavery, a free man must control those on whom he depends. But since fathers and sons depend on those they call Hagars and Ishmaels, they are haunted by specters, the estranged power their disclaimed dependence gives to their slaves.

To escape the dependence that signified captivity, Southern and Northern men invoked self-determination and property rights, but disagreed about property in slave labor; the North reenacted the emancipatory promise of liberalism to redeem the nation from the sin of slavery to bring a rebirth of

freedom to what they called the fathers' house. Thus did Sethe flee north to join a community of escaped slaves. From their position, though, free labor means wage labor and captivity within a despotic home writ large. Yet formal rights do enable the forming of a countercommunity, whose vicissitudes constitute the second moment in the novel's retelling of deliverance.

To the enslaved, servitude means that milk and labor are "stolen"; they are forced to provide a nurturance and recognition they lack the power to demand and the right to receive. Masters, says Sethe, not only "work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you . . . so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore." For a people forbidden to desire and unable to protect those they love, "loving small" seems crucial to survival, but the power to love and the right to be-loved is central to freedom. Insisting she has "enough milk for all," Sethe thus dreams of a community in which nurture as love and labor is not devalued and coerced, but chosen, reciprocal, and effective.

As freedom depends on bonds of love that promise to redeem a captive people or nation, so escaped slaves invoke emancipatory rights to found a "beloved" community. But a ghost signifies their haunting by a past servitude they would "beat back" and forget: the story of Sethe's family thus relates the problem of remembering and redeeming the past, and the problems in defining freedom as mutual nurture.

That relationship is first voiced by Sethe's grandmother: freed by her son's labor, Baby Suggs assumed the vocation of "unchurched preacher" by letting "her great heart beat" in the presence of her peers. "Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. . . . *You* got to love it" because "the only grace [you] could have was the grace [you] could imagine." Baby Suggs felt defeated and chose to die, however, because Whites "came into my yard" to destroy the love she defended, because "a community of other free negroes," envying her reunited family, stood back, and because Sethe's love meant murder.

Sethe faced love's powerlessness, but also exercised the frightful power it can justify. "Whites might dirty *her* . . . but not her best thing," those "parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful"; she gathered "every bit of life she had made," to "drag them through the veil . . . where they would be safe." Claiming her act was "right because it came from true love," and rejected by neighbors judging her "pride," Sethe and Denver, her daughter, retreat to a house haunted by a ghost both spiteful and "needing a lot of love." The arrival of Paul D., who seeks a present with Sethe, provokes its fleshly return, which exposes deeper ambiguities in love as a model for politics.

For Sethe *makes* herself captive to her past and ghostly other; she dreams of a seamless union of love and understanding to repair their wounds. To redeem her abandonment as a daughter and her act of murder as a mother,

Sethe resurrects her beloved other; in the name of love she sacrifices her mortal being. Becoming "like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life . . . the older woman yielded it up without a murmur." While Sethe would "make up for a handsaw," Beloved is both "making her pay for it" and trying to satisfy a "longing" for love that is "bottomless." Bound to a past both would fix by gaining wholeness and vindication from the other, they create a familial prison drained of life.<sup>19</sup>

In *Beloved*, life and freedom require the (mother) love that signifies food and recognition, but nurture is not all of life, and freedom requires more than its mutuality. In part, nurture must be a form of servitude for the mother: children require care that partly displaces the self. In part, as the resentment of ex-children like Beloved testifies, nurturers wield power precisely by claims to self-effacing sacrifice. As the more adult and equal relationships we seek are shaped by a (familial) past of power and dependence, so the ideal of nurture can repeat the forms of power and self-denial in the history it would repair.

In the name of beloved community as a (familial) refuge that redeems past wounds, we can be wed to the past, injury, and each other in ways that drown the present, devalue separation, and sanction resentful vindication. In *Beloved*, therefore, moral superiority does not derive from oppression, or innocence from love. Redemptive countercommunity, built on these terms by ex-slaves, can justify a self-imposed captivity whose "veil" of love Morrison "rips" for the sake of their freedom.

Of course, masters create domination in seeking redemption from dependence as captivity, while ex-slaves would redeem the wounds inflicted by domination. So Sethe's family does embody an alternative to slavery, patriarchy, and capitalism. Yet masters and ex-slaves both make family a model of politics, and redemption its purpose. Indeed, Sethe's relation to Beloved signifies the American dream, made flesh, of the "more perfect union" that redeems the crimes, and thus the divisions, haunting us. Since the prophets, this dream has been emplotted in a narrative of captivity and deliverance, which *Beloved* depicts as a tragic, inevitably imprisoning attempt to make community a home that redeems its members and the past. How, then, should the final moment in Morrison's captivity story be understood?

In my reading thus far, freedom in America has been joined to the pursuit of redemption, the promise that we can make good, render worthy and justified, both a self defined by lack or flaw, and a past defined by wound or crime. This promise does empower, but in a way that can bind autonomy to domination, nurture to self-denial, and agency to repetition. Thus do Sethe's neighbors intervene to exorcise a ghostly "invasion" by the past for the sake of life and change in the present. As the "voices of women" formed a "sound

that broke the back of words," Sethe "trembled like the baptized in its wash." Yet her rebirth, and Beloved's departure, also seems to depend upon reliving her primal terror and redoing her primal deed, a second chance by which, Tom Paine said, to begin the world over again.

Is this not the redemptive American dream and possible only in fiction? In part it is. But Morrison's fiction suggests the transformative capacity of humans who are free because or to the extent that they can begin to act rather than react by changing inherited patterns. Sethe cannot change the past and her life is still conditioned by bodily need and human bonds, by poverty, patriarchy, and White power. That she attacks the man rather than the child, though, signifies how choices can be made differently, in part to direct rage against its proper targets.

The ghost disappears; Sethe is delivered by the voices of women and her own action. Yet, as she willed its presence, she feels loss, not liberation; her act is pregnant with a change she does not intend, but laments. Without her beloved other and "best thing," her identity is no longer bound to a nightmarish past or to her bloody choices in the name of love. But who is she without the effort to redeem them? Her guilt and sense of worthlessness have led her to think that she requires redemption; since no one and no past *can* be redeemed—not by any sacrifice or creation—she has lodged in such acts an impossible and imprisoning burden.<sup>20</sup>

Since the garden, freedom is a gift experienced as loss. The loss of Beloved is that painful gift if Sethe can relinquish an identity that feels the need to redeem itself and its past. Freed from this captivity, which had made her life meaningful, she could enter the present and will, not suffering and self-denial, but a future. Facing her separateness, she could become her own "best thing," defined by accident of birth, child rearing, and circumstances, and by her recreation of herself over time, servitude, sins, and all.

She did not create the horrible wounds on her back, but as the White girl, Amy, depicted them as a broad tree, and as Sethe communicates this to Paul D., we witness the act of transfiguring the markings inflicted by history. In a parable of renaming that crosses racial and gendered lines, we become our own "best thing" in relation to scars we cannot efface or redeem, but whose beauty we can help each other affirm. This is an act of love, and art. As Paul's friend said of his lover, "the pieces I am, she gathers them and give them back to me in all the right order." We re-member by stories no one of us authors alone; community, Paul suggests, is laying our stories "next" to each other. But transfiguration by love and art is not transcendence: the novel's last word is Beloved because the plea, be-loved, cannot escape or redeem the pain, loss, and longing that name also speaks.



### CONCLUSION

Morrison uses the genre of slave narrative to subvert the nationalist jeremiad, in which good sons escape captivity by redeeming a legacy of freedom, but also subverts the genre she uses, which endows redemptive promise in the suffering of a captive countercommunity. Confronting the power of this story, however, depends on a retelling that takes it seriously to reveal the motives and consequences of its framing of identity, community, and history.

*Beloved* solicits, makes visible, and then defeats the desire (and mental framework) of readers who identify with a protagonist seeking not only emancipation from servitude but also redemption of the self and the past. The novel ruptures patterns of repetition because readers who witness the vicissitudes in (their own) dreams of deliverance gain a (second) chance to think and act differently. Thus does *Beloved* retell a captivity narrative to dramatize and then relinquish the dream of redemption at its core, precisely for the sake of the freedom it also has promised.

Indeed, since a transformed relation to the past, the self, and others, and thus a language of captivity and rebirth, is central to the imagination of freedom in America, *Beloved* is a work of political education indebted to the legacies and stories it illuminates and moves beyond. To clarify its repetition with a difference, hence its view of freedom, thereby its political resonance, consider how the language and action within it is related to the world beyond it.

Most obviously, the novel shows how freedom depends on naming captivity: *Beloved* reveals a society constituted by profound divisions, historically embedded, psychologically charged, and socially sedimented in practices of labor and nurture. Sethe bespeaks the particular and the general in the fact that she is legally free, but bound to a mortal and desiring body, and thus implicated in bonds of love and power; rooted in an unchangeable past; conditioned by inherently problematic but changeable forms of labor and caring, and by contingent but recalcitrant relations of race and gender; and invested in a powerful but constructed narrative of redemption.

By naming such conditions as a legacy confronted in the world and the self, *Beloved* represents a struggle to *become* free. It involves an effort to achieve a right relationship to the past, but also to distinguish in the present the kinds of servitude that are inescapable, coerced, or self-imposed. As characters deliberate about their suffering, bonds, and choices, they exemplify Nietzsche's "digestion," by which a worldly legacy taken inside becomes not only an "illness" of repetition and reaction, but a "pregnancy." As Sethe arrives in all ambivalence at a generative moment once precluded, so

the novel has digested an all-too-present past to foster the power to originate buried in what Emerson called the sepulchers of the fathers.

That power, to create not a child but new stories to pass on, bespeaks the intimate bond between narration and freedom that is exemplified by *Be-loved's* characters and the novel as a whole. For naming captivity and suffering, digesting the past, testing the limits it has imposed, and exercising the value-bestowing power in defining, desiring, and laboring are accomplishments and activities tied to the poetics of narratives. One bridge between *Beloved* and the world, then, is the act and art of narration that it makes central to freedom and thus to politics, which appears as a struggle—through stories—about which to let go and how to tell the ones we pass on.

A second bridge, therefore, is *how* the novel relates stories and our (political) life together. For it is dialogic: Sethe's interior life is a conversation, other characters reinterpret her choices, each narrating the history that binds them and the responses that distinguish them. *Beloved* thereby creates a space in which plural voices engage in an ongoing practice of making sense. That is because, in reverence for particularity and the richness of language, it lays stories "next" to each other. In that space, authority lies not in origins, revealed truth, or even consensus, but in experience and the language by which they voice, confirm, and contest it, and thus deepen, reconceive, and change it.

In a space created by a captivity story whose form is stories, the past, experience, and choices are endowed with a meaning that is not self-evident, authored singly, or produced once and for all. By way of its form, then, a novel *about* the effort to redeem the past defeats longings for redemption as narrative closure. In turn, as narration opens a space in which characters confront their history, struggle for freedom, and dream of redemption, *Be-loved* engages its "postreconstruction" context.

On one hand, the novel enters a culture haunted by a history of servitude. Facing it seems impossible: the ideology of self-making warrants denial, fantasies of escape, and resentment toward those signifying failed self-determination. But insisting on historical wrong also risks intensifying the resentment that weds some identities to injury, resentment, and retribution, and others to denial and guilt. The novel enacts political education, then, by showing the necessity of confronting the past, but also the difficulty of moving beyond rather than drowning in it. Like Sethe, *Beloved* rejects the dream of escaping the past, but raises the dead and lives with them; unlike Sethe, it relives the past to relinquish the dream of redeeming the suffering and crimes that make it haunting. Thus the novel does not *use* the past to prove guilt or innocence or recover a model for life. Unlike such stories,

*Beloved* dramatizes the need to vindicate a past it does not heroize or demonize to elicit the grieving for irreparable loss that, by changing both anger and hope, releases energy to will a future.

By this achievement, on the other hand, a revised captivity narrative emplots the internal and worldly dimensions of democratic possibility. *Beloved*'s textual spaces are an experiment—through language, with others, and on the self—in carving out of past and present servitude not a promise of redemption, but self-government in its personal and political senses. By going behind liberal origins, below contractual surfaces, and outside redemptive symmetries, *Beloved* represents the language and spaces by which a haunted people could confront the history and servitude, suffering, resentment, and stories that hold them captive to forge thereby neither solace nor unity, but a new kind of authority as authors and citizens.

As memory is used to separate from the past, and anger to contest rather than pass on its legacy, the present appears as if for the first time, in its profound difficulty and divisions, and ripe with possibilities once foreclosed by resentful energies and redemptive dreams. Surely, poetry is not politics. But some such retelling of the story of captivity and redemption seems crucial to move the American experiment in democracy beyond its current stalemate.

### NOTES

1. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

2. America is a "Puritan and trading nation" because of faith in self-determination and thus commitment to rights, propertied individualism, and popular sovereignty, secured by a Puritan investment in moral self-control and rational self-possession, and underwritten by a providential view of history. These terms constitute the charged cultural horizon that defines who can bear rights, while endowing their exercise with meaning.

3. At issue is the self-limitation generated by identities defined through a narrative of revolutionary origins and thus committed (in principle) to the unprecedented.

4. Bercovitch puts the idea of self-making at the core of national identity: Elsewhere, "to be independent was to challenge society," whereas here, "independence became the norm for representative selfhood" and "a model of consensus." See "Rites of Assent" (*The American Self*, edited by S. Girgus [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981], 13, 20).

5. His own use of "must" is central to controversy about his view of power and contest in American culture. See the exchange in the *Journal of American History* (December 1991).

6. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking, 1961); Wm. Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1933); Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University, 1973); *Fatal Environment* (Middletown: Wesleyan University, 1985); Michael Rogin, *Fathers and Children* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975);

*Subversive Genealogy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983); Ronald Reagan, *the Movie* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (London: Verso, 1991); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

7. Antebellum Southern men invoke rights and make plantations a household and redemptive alternative to mercenary relations in the capitalist North. Northern men expose the despotism in this idealization, defend propertied individualism, and lament a "house divided" and call Isaacs to sacrifices that redeem its sins. Facing industrial capitalism, progressives read city and nation as both a business and a moral household. In each case, households are endangered by people and activities figured as antifamilial, whose allegorical power derives from sites of racial and female subordination. Not coincidentally, female reformers and Black nationalists have used familial imagery to signify and form alternative communities.

8. See Christine Stansell, *City of Women* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986); Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Eldon Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994); Keith Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King and Its Sources* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

9. See Anne Norton, "Engendering Another America" (*Rhetorical Republic*, edited by F. Dolan and T. Dumm [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993]), who criticizes liberal exclusion by invoking an "America" whose promise exceeds any limitation.

10. See Richard Sennet and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage, 1973); Norman Jacobson, "New World Passional," unpublished; Wm. Connolly, "Appearance and Reality in Politics," *Interpreting Politics*, edited by Michael Gibbon (New York: New York University Press, 1988); Stanley Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," *Must We Mean What We Say* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

11. An identity politics plotted by contrasting narratives of innocent captivity emerges from the vicissitudes of postwar liberalism. Although cold war liberals had projected evil outside an innocent nation, they also were forced to face the historic guilt of unreconstructed racial relations. Seeking a cross-class and interracial coalition, their jeremiads linked combat on new frontiers and social reform to redeem the purpose and suffering of ancestors. But this "beautiful revolution," as Marx put it, foundered on "the social question." Middle-class students, feminists, and Black Power advocates, confronting the limits of liberal reform, began to reject the symbolism of America; working-class people, invested in the story of sacrifice that redeems suffering and dignifies labor, felt their lives (and America) betrayed, robbed of meaning. For contrasting accounts, see Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21 (August 1993); and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

12. See Christopher Lasch, John Patrick Diggins, and Cornell West, who revise a prophetic Calvinism.

13. Readings of the novel focus first on the history of the middle passage and slavery that haunts African Americans; second, on power exercised on Black and female bodies, and in these terms on labor, nurture, and the power of and over language; third, on the familial dynamics of the preoedipal mother-child bond as a paradigm of tensions between authority and autonomy, and between memory and agency; fourth, on the multiple voices in the text, which disclose Sethe's story but also the impossibility of knowing it definitively. See David Lawrence, "Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*," *Studies in American Fiction* 19 (Autumn 1991); Mae G. Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Remembering the Body as Historical Text," *Comparative American Identities*, edited by Hortense Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991); Susan Bowers, "*Beloved* and the New Apocalypse," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*

18 (Spring 1990); Emily Miller Budick, "Absence, Loss, and the Space of History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Arizona Quarterly* 48 (Summer 1992); Anne E. Goldman, "'I Made the Ink': (Literary) Production and Reproduction in *Desa Rose and Beloved*," *Feminist Studies* 16 (Summer 1990); Barbara Shapiro, "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Contemporary Literature* 32 (Summer 1991); Barbara Offutt Mathieson, "Memory and Mother Love in Morrison's *Beloved*," *American Image* 47 (Spring 1990); Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "Daughters Signifying History: The Example of Morrison's *Beloved*," *American Literature* 64 (September 1992); Andrew Levy, "Telling *Beloved*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33 (Spring 1991).

14. For Morrison's account, see Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, "A Conversation," *Southern Review* 21 (1985). For the Douglass quote, see Ashraf Rushdy, "Daughters Signifying History." In turn, I focus on Sethe's story, and only note the other story lines, which involve the Black men of Sweet Home, the role of the Black community in the North, the grandmother, Baby Suggs and surviving daughter, Denver.

15. Toni Morrison, "Site of Memory," *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, edited by William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 109-10; and "Living Memory," *Small Acts*, edited by Paul Gilroy (London: Serpents Tail, 1993), 175-82.

16. On the veil, see W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet, 1982); on romance, see Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*; on forgetting the past, see "Living Memory."

17. See Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 221.

18. Making the same assumption, Stanley Crouch viciously attacks *Beloved* for canonizing victims: "Above all else it is a blackface holocaust novel." See Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 217.

19. First, *Beloved* in many ways is not only Sethe's daughter, but also the ghost of her own murdered mother: the symmetry in their bond, then, involves two child-women coming to terms with the meaning of maternity (and abandonment) under slavery. The result, second, is a tragic view of love, for as Morrison says about Garner, by loving "something other than herself so much," and placing "all the value of her life in something outside herself," she demonstrated how "the best thing in us is also the thing that makes us sabotage ourselves." Third, then, the familial story is a political parable about what Emily Budick describes as the "desperate and ultimately doomed effort to resurrect, compensate for, or replace an irrevocably lost past." See also Budick, "Absence, Loss, and the Space of History," 129.

20. "Memory of the past must include the idea of loss: that what the past has taken from us no present or future reality can restore," Emily Budick, "Absence, Loss, and the Space of History," 135.

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